

# PIETY, PRACTICALITY, AND PRECIOUS STONES

## Decoding Symbolism of Girdle Books

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*A rare find these days, a girdle book, was once a powerful symbol of piety, status, and even fashion. The girdle book was one of the clever medieval book technologies that allowed it to be used anytime, anywhere. For monks and religious people, it was very convenient to have their breviary at work and on the road to have their 'hands free'. The travelling pious people also favoured keeping girdle books within reach and taking notes on the go.*

*Apart from being practical, the girdle book also symbolised religious devotion, knowledge and social status. For noble women it was a treasure to get a small book of hours or prayer book that they would wear on a golden chain or on their belt. It would demonstrate their literacy but also symbolise their status, fashion, and taste.*

**Keywords:** *fashion symbol; female literacy; girdle books; Middle Ages; religious devotion*



For centuries, books have been changing shapes, scripts, and materials. They have been of a different significance, availability, and with a diverse use and readership. They represented wisdom and knowledge, piety, nobility, and a great deal of other things. Books have

always been used as symbols and medieval girdle books were not an exception.

Little known these days, the girdle book was one of the most innovative bookbinding inventions of the Middle Ages. The girdle book is a term used to

describe a bound book that can be hung from or by the girdle (belt). The distinguishing feature of this unique book format is its long extension of the leather cover along the lower edge of the book, held there by a large knob or hook incorporated into the overhanging leather.<sup>1</sup> A need for portable books of personal devotion, such as breviaries and prayer books, arrived with the increasing interest in pilgrimages and the founding of the mendicant religious orders, like the Franciscans. Girdle books were conveniently adapted for the use of clergy and monks to be carried around and consulted at any convenient time with the purpose of reciting their offices.<sup>2</sup> The girdle book was in production between mid-14th to mid-16th century and appeared to be common in the narrow area of the Netherlands and Germany, but examples from France, Spain, Italy, Scandinavia, and England are also seen.<sup>3</sup>

A dramatically small number of girdle books can be found these days. According to U. Bruckner, there are only 23 surviving copies<sup>4</sup> accompanied by comprehensive visual documentation.<sup>5</sup> Many have perished simply due to wear and tear and could not be preserved. It is believed, however, that many more may be

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housed, unrecognised, in libraries and other repositories if the leather extension, for example, was removed to facilitate shelving. Fortunately, there are 813 known observations of girdle books represented in the visual arts including paintings, prints, painted altars, tombstones, and sculpture, most likely referencing 1450-1600 time period.<sup>6</sup> Their popularity in art indicates a much wider distribution and adoption of the girdle book as binding, than surviving copies suggest. Thus, the wide range of extant depictions of girdle books will allow us to decode the symbols hidden inside them.

### **Medieval girdle book as a symbol of religious devotion**

Girdle books most certainly were a powerful symbol of being pious and devout. The medieval girdle book was a convenient portable

device that was quite common among people associated with the church. According to visual and written sources, most owners or carriers of girdle books are biblical figures or clergymen with approximately a third (33%) of those being Apostles (John being the most prevalent).

Saints, monks, and nuns are also seen.<sup>7</sup> The evidence of this is found in the Arts, where girdle books appear in the hands of different figures but are most frequently used as symbolical attributes of saints, the Virgin, the four evangelists, and apostles. Relying on the artwork, we can assume that religious figures fancied having their portable Bibles or prayers on them, for example on the ‘The Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple of Jerusalem’ (1493), painted by German painter Hans Holbein the Elder (fig.1), or in ‘St John the Evangelist in Crucifixion with the Muller family’ (1462). Diehl mentions that monks ‘must have been consoled by the ever presence of their breviaries, made possible by the girdle book’.<sup>8</sup>

Monks, nuns, and other religious people had to read their prayers several times during the day as directed by their orders, and since they often worked outdoors and travelled between monasteries and convents, or on missions and pilgrimages, it was important to have the prayer book, breviary, or book of personal devotions always handy.<sup>9</sup> This can be observed on the few studied paintings, altarpieces (*The Temptation of St Anthony* (Hieronymus Bosch, between 1500 and 1525). ‘s-Hertogenbosch, F. van Lanschot Collection (fig.1); The Apostles farewell from an altarpiece at the Franciscan church at Bozen (1495 – 1505); San Antonio Abad, *San Antonio Abad Ala of the altarpiece of Our Lady of the Conception* (preserved incomplete), Joos van Cleve c.1530-37, Agaete (Gran Canaria) and on one instant girdle book (A “girdle book” breviary, 1454, New York Public Library, New York Spencer Coll. MS 39).



Figure 1: *The Temptation of St Anthony* (Hieronymus Bosch, between 1500 and 1525). ‘s-Hertogenbosch, F. van Lanschot Collection.

One of the most distinct symbolic meanings of the girdle book can be observed in Hieronymus Bosch depiction of St. James the Greater— a pilgrim who carries two objects attached to his belt: a knife in a sheath, and his girdle book (St. James the Greater as pilgrim, *Last Judgement Triptych* (left outer wing), Hieronymus Bosch). Apparently, the book is of a great significance for St. James; despite the gloomy and threatening landscape, bent and weary, he still carries it in a conspicuous fashion. For pilgrims, their books might have been indispensable objects, with the same power as the St. James’ knife – to deal with evil and danger. The book is well protected with the leather overhanging the top edge and secured by the barely discernible clasp. On the picture in “The Breviary of Queen Isabella of Castile” (1497) used by the Dominicans, an old monk is holding a girdle book bound in the

green cloth in his hand instead of being attached to his girdle, as no belt can be seen on this illustration. For medieval religious travellers, girdle books provided easy portability, as well as protection against inclement weather, dust, or insects. Similarly, in the breviary, on a page displaying the month of May, Christ is raising His right hand in blessing and holding a girdle book with His left hand (Breviary, c. 1315-1325, Italy, Bologna. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, MS M.0373 fol. 3r).

From the artworks examined, it becomes clear that the girdle book was a convenient format for members of religious orders, priests, clerics, and for nuns, in the form of breviaries, diurnals, and books of hours. And yet, it was a powerful symbol of their belief that the girdle book could fend off evil.

The earliest recorded date, 1454, is found in a manuscript breviary from the monastery at Kastl in Germany (A "girdle book" breviary, 1454, New York Public Library, New York Spencer Coll. MS 39). The latest date mentioned in a girdle book text is 1540 in the extraordinary manuscript containing the personal devotions and prayers of a Cistercian nun (Katharine Röder family crests and illustrated fly-leaves. Schweinfurt, Otto Schäfer Bibliothek, OS1233). On its fly-leaves Katharina Röder von Rodeck, member of an ancient aristocratic German family,

includes illustrations of her family's crests and in the first few pages also recalls her entrance into the convent, and records her parents' birth and death dates.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the depictions demonstrate dramatic scenes of saints being tormented by demons and in all of them they wear girdle books as a symbol of their belief in God and His ability to save and protect them. On

Schongauer's engraving, Saint Anthony gazes serenely out at the viewer as frenzied demons grab at his limbs, clothes, and hair, as they pound him with sticks and yet, his girdle book is on him (St. Anthony by Martin Schongauer, c. 1470-1475, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). A similar illustration is that of Saint Catherine of Siena ("Saint Catherine of Siena Besieged by Demons", unknown artist, c. 1500. National

Museum, Warsaw, Poland).

It is noticeable, on some paintings, that the girdle book has served as a religious status symbol in addition to being of practical use. St John the Evangelist in Crucifixion with the Muller family (1462, Salzburg, Institut für Realienkunde) shows a girdle book hanging off the girdle on the right. We might also think that the girdle book owned by a religious person was mainly for personal use rather than preaching or teaching.

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Interestingly, there are two instances in the literature that demonstrate

the varied and contradictory views of girdle books as a symbol. Stressing the negative connotations of the ownership of girdle books, James Kearney points out that the Redcrosse Knight and Una describe Archimago in a quite malicious way.<sup>11</sup> In this example, the girdle book marries Archimago with the reformed iconography of the faithless papist and depicts him as either a '...hypocritical fraud or superstitious idolater'. On the contrary, in Acts and Monuments, the girdle book symbolises protestant faithfulness to the Word of God.<sup>12</sup>

It can be safely assumed that the majority of girdle books purely symbolised religious and devotional nature. Glauning offers significant statistics of figures carrying girdle books: apostles (89), saints (40), Saint Jerome (7), Saint Anthony (5), Saint Nicholas (3), priests ranging from prior to pope (31), and only fourteen women.<sup>13</sup> However ambiguous these numbers are, they will not be taken into consideration in this essay, as a more recent inventory is required for more reliable reference.

## Girdle books denoting female literacy and fashion

**'Apart from practical use, girdle books were a powerful symbol depicted in the visual arts. Not only people connected to the church, but also rich medieval ladies and queens were avid users of their own unfolding and folding handy devices.'**

In the late Middle Ages and early modern era, apart from being practical, girdle books also became fashionable in certain circles of society. Girdle books started to be used in female portraiture denoting piety, literacy, and also fashion. Books of prayers and devotions were written by, or for, lay persons, both men and women, for whom a girdle book might have served as a status symbol in addition to religious use.

Some of the girdle books, of course, were very plain, but there are some examples of highly

decorated girdle books with brass corner pieces, engraving, tooling, ornate fastenings and clasps, and even a coat of arms or other adornment in the centre of the cover (Philippa Rosewell with a girdle book. Artist unknown, 1592. Victoria and Albert Museum).

There is plenty of evidence found in the artworks, as well as in written documentation, that in the 16th century girdle books were worn and admired by noble women. They became quite fashionable among aristocracy, possibly brought

to England from Spain by Catherine of Aragon.<sup>14</sup> According to H. Newman, a girdle book was a small devotional book, often bound within elaborately decorated gold covers, carried in the 15th-17th centuries by women of rank or wealth.<sup>15</sup>

Many historical sources seem to indicate that Elizabethan ladies and gentlemen were fond of carrying very small, almost miniature-sized books, often enamelled and decorated with precious stones on gold covers, containing portraits of their lovers, love poetry, or prayers.<sup>16</sup>

Based on the evidence studied we can assume that the girdle books in a tiny format were especially popular among some medieval queens. Queen Elizabeth I is said to have owned several such miniature books (fig.2: *“Elizabeth I When a Princess”, William Scrots ca.1546/47 Royal Collection*).<sup>17</sup> Likely, Queen Elizabeth I herself and her mother Anne Boleyn might have been the initiators of this trend. These diminutive and richly decorated chained little objects, hanging from ladies’ necks or waists, were part of the Henrician fashion, fashion of Elizabeth’s formative years.<sup>18</sup> It may be said that these tiny relics are signs of piety; however, they are also equally indicative of fashion and taste.

One of these precious artefacts is “Psalms in English verse” (c. 1540), one of the smallest manuscripts in the British Library’s collection (fig.3: *Portrait of Henry VIII, from Psalms in English Verse, metal girdle book South East England, c.*

*1540, Stowe MS 956, ff. 1v-2r.*). It has the illustration of King Henry VIII as the main decoration and is believed to have been owned by Anne Boleyn.<sup>19</sup> Possibly, this holstered miniature book may have been worn on a necklace or girdle and is only slightly bigger than a modern postage stamp.

Another bright example of a highly decorative miniature girdle book from c. 1549 is a printed Prayer Book that is believed to be made by Hans von Antwerpen and presented to Queen Elizabeth I by the Lady Elizabeth Tyrwhit (*Girdle book, c.1540–1545, The British Museum, 1894,0729.1*).<sup>20</sup> It is bound into enamelled gold covers with suspension loops on the upper edges for use as a girdle book. The front cover of the binding depicts the biblical scene of “The Brazen Serpent” and the back depicts “The judgement



Figure 2: *“Elizabeth I When a Princess”, William Scrots ca.1546/47 Royal Collection.*





Figure 3: Portrait of Henry VIII, from *Psalms in English Verse*, metal girdle book South East England, c. 1540, Stowe MS 956, ff. 1v-2r.

of Solomon”, while the spine and two clasps are enamelled with Moresque. Additionally, there is a leather storage case.

More written literature indicates that all the Tudor queens owned books of devotion, many of which were described as “little” and thus may have been girdle books, which seem to have been admired mostly because of their elaborate bindings.<sup>21</sup>

Most girdle books were small, compact, and could easily fit into the reader’s hand. Their size varied from approximately 90 mm to 160 mm high, and up to 50 mm thick.<sup>22</sup> It must be assumed that because of their small size, they were not heavy. This would also assure that they could be carried comfortably on the belt without unduly dragging it down. The depiction of a girdle book on “The Visitation” (The Visitation, c. 1480-1490, Institute for history studies of Middle Ages and Early Modern period, University of Salzburg), however, appears massive and thus raises the question: could this really have been carried or tucked into a belt?

Another proof of girdle book being a symbol of fashion and status is a luxurious exemplar of a book of note from Nuremberg, dating from 1471, with furnishings that carry the coat of arms of the Nuremberg patrician family of Kress (Girdle book from German National Museum in Nuremberg, GNM MS 17231).

Additionally, a few other illustrations depict girdle books used as attributes of ladies of rank, most likely to demonstrate their religious devotion (Portrait of Louise of Savoy as Sibylla Agrippa, Jacques Daret, [c.1404-1470] Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D.C., HC.P.1923; illuminated fragment cut from an unidentified medieval book, *Newbury Library*, Special Collections 4th floor, Medieval Manuscript Fragment 65). Lastly, girdle books appear in the hands of Saint women, however, they are depicted in aristocratic outfit which most likely denotes a high status.

Despite the little number of extant girdle books and a scarce literature about them, based on the artworks and the historical sources found, we can decipher the girdle book’s symbol with success. Girdle books were the hottest technology in portable literacy - they hung upside down so that a monk or a noble lady could just pick their book up from where it hung on their belt or chain and start reading. Apart from practical use, girdle books were a powerful symbol depicted in the visual arts. Not only people connected to the church, but also rich medieval

ladies and queens were avid users of their own unfolding and folding handy devices. In most cases, girdle books would symbolise religiosity and devotion for both religiously devoted people and noble ladies. However, commonly in portraiture girdle books would denote not only religious inclinations, but also female learnedness, or simply fashion;

specially the elaborately decorated girdle books with gold, precious stones, and heraldic achievements, which depicted wealth and status.

*The research is based on written sources, depictions of girdle books and few of the surviving objects in libraries around the world.*



<sup>1</sup> M. Smith & J. Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project', *The International Journal of the Book*, 3:4 (2006), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> E. Diehl, *Bookbinding: Its Background and Technique (Two Volumes Bound as One)* (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> J. Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding* (Hants U.K, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> U. Bruckner, *Studien zum Buch- und Bibliothekswesen*, Beutelbuch-Originale 9 (1995): 5-23.

<sup>5</sup> According to Margit J. Smith, there are twenty-six extant girdle books. Twenty-three are held in museums and libraries in Europe, three are in the United States. However, their current locations are not necessarily the place where they were made.

<sup>6</sup> Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> Diehl, *Bookbinding: Its Background and Technique*, p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Smith & J. Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project'.

<sup>10</sup> M. Smith, 'Anna, Katharina, Dorothea und Margarethe: Das Beutelbuch im Besitz von vier Frauen des Mittelalters', *EinbandForschung*, 24 (2009), pp. 11-22.

<sup>11</sup> J. Kearney, 'Enshrining Idolatry in The Faerie Queene', *English Literary Renaissance*, 32:1, (2002). pp. 3-30. (p. 11)

<sup>12</sup> Smith & J. Bloxam, 'The medieval girdle book project'.

<sup>13</sup> O. Glauning, *Der Buchbeutel in der bildenden Kunst*. Deutscher Buchgewerbeverein, (Jahrgang, 1926). Band 63.

<sup>14</sup> H. Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Jewelry: 2,530 Entries, Including Definitions of Jewels, Gemstones, Materials, Processes, and Styles, and Entries on Principal Designers and Makers, from Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 231.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Smith & J. Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project'.

<sup>17</sup> Some sources claim that the portrait depicts Queen Elizabeth I with one of her girdle books; others say she is just holding it.

<sup>18</sup> P. Collinson, *Elizabethans* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2003), pp. 92-93.

<sup>19</sup> E. Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), p. 406.

<sup>20</sup> H. Ostovich & E. Sauer (eds.), *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in*



*Manuscript and Print, 1550-1700*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), p. 471.

<sup>21</sup> R. M. Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York and Her Six Daughters-in-Law: Fashioning Tudor Queenship, 1485-1547* (Springer, 2017), p.100.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, & J. Bloxam, 'The Medieval Girdle Book Project'.